

SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
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BOBBIE SINGER OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS

**INTERVIEWEE:** BOBBIE SINGER

**INTERVIEWER:** CINDY COLE

**SUBJECTS:** NEW YORK; GREAT DEPRESSION; WORLD WAR II; RESCUING JEWS FROM NAZI GERMANY; ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY; CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY; TEACHING; EUROPEAN TRAVEL; UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY; CATHOLIC SCHOOL TEACHER; BEING JEWISH AT A CATHOLIC SCHOOL; ETHICAL CULTURE SCHOOLS; ELEANOR ROOSEVELT; PHD; SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH; SEATTLE; MUSIC; PHILANTHROPY

**LOCATION:** SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

**DATE:** DECEMBER 5, 2014

**INTERVIEW LENGTH:** 00:35:51

**FILE NAME:** SingerBobbie\_SLCOHC\_2014\_Audio.wav

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is an interview with Bobbie Singer. It is taking place in Seattle, Washington, and the date is December 5, 2014. Bobbie, why don't you just tell us where you were born and some things about your childhood that you feel influenced your life?

[00:00:35] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Do you want me to start talking now?

[00:00:36] **CINDY:** Yes.

[00:00:38] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Well, when I was a little girl, I grew up in a very rich family. My father was one of those people who came from Romania, but was a real mathematical genius. He invented a whole bunch of pieces and machinery and stuff like that. He also designed the . . . what do you call it . . . the sight that went on all the carbine rifles in World War I. He was a very, very brilliant man, and was very fond of me because my mother had not wanted to have any more children after she had my sister, and so she kind of ignored me. As a matter of fact, she had a governess for me that took care of me so that she wouldn't have to bother with me.

I went to the Ethical Culture Schools in New York, which were a tremendous influence on me. Do you want me to describe that?

[00:02:14] **CINDY:** Yeah, why don't you describe that? That would be great.

[00:02:15] **BOBBIE SINGER:** The Ethical Culture Schools started out with in first grade, you studied prehistoric man; in second grade you studied the Egyptians; in third grade you studied Greece; in fourth grade you studied Rome; in fifth grade you studied the Middle Ages; in sixth grade you studied the discovery of the New World and the whole Renaissance period. It was a very, very thorough education and something that I depended on for the rest of my life.

[00:03:02] **CINDY:** Were there any events in your childhood? What year were you born?

[00:03:08] **BOBBIE SINGER:** 1924.

[00:03:11] **CINDY:** So you lived during the Depression. Did that have some influence on you?

[00:03:19] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Well, my father was a very competent manufacturer, and he actually designed the gun sight that was used in World War II [transcriber note: above, she said World War I] . He brought a lot of Jews over from Germany. He recognized what a sonofabitch Hitler was, and he brought—and at one time he had a lawyer and a doctor cleaning up his factory.

[00:04:17] **CINDY:** I know that Dan [Roberts?] mentioned something about an apple seller when you were a child?

[00:04:23] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Oh, yeah. There were these apple sellers on the corner and I had an allowance. I got a certain allowance from my parents, something like 75 cents a week, which meant that I had 10 cents carfare a day, and then the other five cents I spent on my apple seller. I bought an apple from him every day.

One day, when I was walking toward the corner, a car jumped the curb and knocked the apple seller's apples all over the place, and the cops came and started beating up the apple seller. I went screaming down the street, "Don't beat up Mr. Apple Seller! Don't beat up Mr. Apple Seller!"

[00:05:34] **CINDY:** What do you think motivated you?

[00:05:37] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Well, I don't know. I think that I had been motivated to deal with the underdog.

[00:05:52] **CINDY:** Is there anything else in your childhood that stands out?

[00:05:56] **BOBBIE SINGER:** When I was a little girl, we lived across the street from the Museum of Natural History, and we used to play across the street jump rope and stuff like that. One day there was a family of kids

who came out. There were three or four of them and they were, I don't know, nine, 11 and 13 years old, and they only had one coat for the three of them. Considering the fact that I had two coats, I gave one of the coats to one of the kids.

When I got home, I was shivering because I'd given my coat away. My mother said to me, "Where is your coat?" I said, "I gave it to somebody who needed a coat, and I had more than one coat, so I gave my away." My mother got furious at me and she just said, "Oh, my goodness! Wait till your father gets home and he'll really spank you for giving your coat away." When my father came home, she told him what I had done, and he gave me a great big wink, like that, and smiled at me and kind of walked away, which was an approval of what I had done. My father was a great . . . what do you call it when people give money away?

[00:08:03] **CINDY:** Philanthropist?

[00:08:04] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Yeah, he was a great philanthropist and gave money away to help the Jews get out of Germany, and he helped, oh, just a lot of charities. He really believed in keeping his kinfolk very well, but giving as much money away as possible.

[00:08:42] **CINDY:** Tell me about your college years and teaching and things like that.

[00:08:57] **BOBBIE SINGER:** After I graduated from the Fieldston School, which was the high school of the Ethical Culture Schools, I was accepted at, oh, I don't know, Radcliffe and Bryn Mawr and all these other schools, but I chose to go to Antioch College, which had a bad reputation in those days as a home of free love and communism.

When I got to Antioch, I found that they were way, way behind in academics from where I was, because the Fieldston School had been a very tough school to get into. I was accepted at Radcliffe and Bryn Mawr and whatnot, but I chose to go to Antioch.

[00:10:32] **CINDY:** Is there anything that stands out at that time at Antioch that helped shape who you are?

[00:10:40] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Well, yes. Antioch was called the home of free love and communism, and that influenced me a lot.

[00:11:03] **CINDY:** Sure. Tell me about your teaching career.

[00:11:43] **BOBBIE SINGER:** When I got out of Antioch, I did a year of graduate work at the . . . oh, god, what was it called . . . Catholic University? Anyway, it was a pretty funny thing because here was this nice Jewish girl who was going to this Catholic university.

[00:12:17] **CINDY:** You want to talk about your marriages? I know Dan talked about you going over to Europe and things like that, and how did having Dan kind of change your life?

[00:12:38] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Oh, Dan was my first and only child. Like he says, I'm his first and only mother. [chuckles] But we went to Europe for a year when Dan was . . . was he 12? I think so.

[00:13:04] **CINDY:** Yeah, I think so.

[00:13:09] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Let's see . . . he was born in 1949, so he must have been about 12 years old. We went to England first, and then we went to Copenhagen, Denmark, and we had a wonderful, wonderful time in Copenhagen. We lived with a woman who had been part of the Danish underground during World War II, when the Germans took over. She was very much in favor of Jewish people. She didn't like the Germans and she liked the Jewish people.

[00:14:11] **CINDY:** What happened when you were in England? Did you just live there, or is there anything special that stood out as far as your time in England?

[00:14:22] **BOBBIE SINGER:** I lived in England many years later. We weren't in England for very long, we were mostly up in Denmark.

[00:14:37] **CINDY:** Why don't you skip ahead then and tell me about your time in England when you lived there for a time?

[00:14:46] **BOBBIE SINGER:** When I lived in England I was married, and my husband was a psychologist. He got a year off to go study in . . . what was the name of the institute?

[00:15:06] **CINDY:** Cambridge?

[00:15:07] **BOBBIE SINGER:** No. Oh, dear.

[00:15:20] **CINDY:** What part of England?

[00:15:24] **BOBBIE SINGER:** London.

[00:15:25] **CINDY:** It was in London.

[00:15:30] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Yeah, we were in Cambridge before that. The first time we went to England—or the first time I went to England—I went with Dan. That was the year that Dan and I spent in Europe. But that has nothing to do with my later period, year in England.

My husband was a psychologist and he was studying at the . . . what was it called . . . the Sigmund Freud Institute or something? I was working at the Planned Parenthood . . . what was it called? It was called something. I still support Planned Parenthood. But I can't remember what it was called in England.

[00:17:06] **CINDY:** Sorry, I can't help you. I don't know either. It's my understanding that you did teach at one time, at a later time even, in Berkeley, California. Is there any memories about being in Berkeley at that time?

[00:17:32] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Oh, yeah. Berkeley was a very exciting place.

[00:17:41] **CINDY:** When were the years that you were there?

[00:17:45] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Hmm. Let's see . . . from the time I was about 35 to . . . I lived in Berkeley for 50 years.

[00:18:26] **CINDY:** Were you part of the City Council there, or did you involve yourself in politics?

[00:18:31] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Oh, I involved myself in a tremendous amount of politics in Berkeley.

[00:18:36] **CINDY:** Can you explain a little bit about that?

[00:18:40] **BOBBIE SINGER:** I was never on the City Council, but I gave my support. In the elections, I gave a lot of support to the left-wing candidates.

[00:19:02] **CINDY:** Okay. I remember you talking one time about a student that you had, and that you were teaching, and he couldn't read but he had something to do with fire or something, that he wanted to burn down a bunch of buildings or something? And you really helped him out.

[00:19:33] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Oh, yeah. There was a student of mine who was in the reading program, but he really hated it because the reading program was "Sally had a pink balloon," kind of stupid stuff, so I got him a book. We were looking out the window one day and he said something to me about how he would like to burn down the entire city of Berkeley with all the rich people's houses. I pointed out my house and I said, "Just don't burn that one down," and he said he wouldn't do it.

So, I went to the library and got him a book that was about the slave rebellions before the Civil War, and I got him a dictionary to go with it. And he read the entire book, although he was supposed to be a non-reader. He wasn't supposed to be able to read, but I got him a dictionary to go with the book and he read the book. We kept in touch for a number of years afterwards, and he became a firefighter. He went to . . . what do you call it? Junior college?

[00:21:42] **CINDY:** Yes, or community college. Is there anything more about that period of time when you were teaching? What kind of students did you teach?

[00:21:58] **BOBBIE SINGER:** I taught . . . what was that Catholic school I mentioned?

[00:22:12] **CINDY:** I'm sorry. You taught at a Catholic school?

[00:22:16] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Yeah. I taught at a Catholic school, and I taught American history. It was a pretty strange experience for me because here was a nice Jewish girl who was teaching at a Catholic school. One of the nuns once said something to me about "How do you feel when we all stand in class, before class starts, and we say 'Hail Mary, Mother of God, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus?'" And I said, "Well, when you're saying that, I'm saying, 'Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad.'" Then she laughed and she said, "I wondered what you were muttering about all that time."

[00:23:12] **CINDY:** Can you translate that?

[00:23:20] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is One.

[00:23:27] **CINDY:** I understand, if I got this right, that you met Eleanor Roosevelt once?

[00:23:33] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Uh-huh.

[00:23:34] **CINDY:** What was the circumstance about that?

[00:23:38] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Well, the Ethical Culture Schools only ran for about eight months. They started at the end of September and they ended in June. I did some volunteer work at a camp where we were trying to get it all fixed up so that the kids from the Lower West Side in Manhattan, who never saw a tree in their lives, could come up to the camp.

I have this memory of I was whitewashing one of the bathrooms, and I had a towel around my head and around my hair to keep the paint from getting into my hair, and Eleanor Roosevelt came in with the head of the camp, and the woman introduced me. She said, "Mrs. Roosevelt, I'd like you to meet Rosalind [Schoenfeld?] . She's one of our volunteers." I was very embarrassed because I had my hair all turned up in a big towel, and I was wearing a pair of painter's overalls that were about four sizes too big for me.

That was in June or July, and then the following January, I went to a meeting that was where I went to hear somebody speak. His name was John Lovejoy Elliott and they were from the Elliott-Lovejoy families that had been in the antislavery movement. And Mrs. Roosevelt came in with her retinue and she said, "Hello, Rosalind. How are you?" I almost fell over. I couldn't figure out how she even remembered me. I mentioned it to one of her nephews and he said, "She remembers for what you were doing, not for what your name was." No. "She remembered you for what you were doing, not for what you were wearing." Because I was all dressed up in my fanciest clothes, my black coat with a velvet collar and little headdress on my hair and whatnot.

[00:27:21] **CINDY:** Do you have any other recollections about Eleanor Roosevelt, or something that you were part of?

[00:27:38] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Well, then I became very socially active kind of in Berkeley politics.

[00:27:53] **CINDY:** From that particular influence of Eleanor, because she was that way. How did you get into public health? It's my understanding that you did some work with public health.

[00:28:20] **BOBBIE SINGER:** I had a master's degree in history from the Catholic University. I wanted to get my Ph.D. and I was turned down by the Department of History at Cal because they said they didn't want anybody my age in their program. I was 39 years old at the time. So, I heard about the public health looking for people who had been out in the world and done some things before they went to graduate school. An awful lot of people just graduate from college and then go on to graduate school, and I wasn't like that. I had been doing some other things. I heard about the School of Public Health and I went and applied for that. The dean of the School of Public Health looked at my graduate record scores, which were in the 99th percentile, and just sort of swept me in.

[00:29:48] **CINDY:** Do you have any experiences you want to relate from that particular time? Do you have any experiences from that time that stand out for you from your work in public health?

[00:30:06] **BOBBIE SINGER:** The work in the School of Public Health that I did, I really valued more than anything I had ever done in my life before. Public health seemed to me to be a wonderful field in which to work with people.

[00:30:34] **CINDY:** What were some of the things that you did?

[00:30:42] **BOBBIE SINGER:** One of the things that I did was I helped to develop a curriculum for the public schools in Berkeley. The curriculum was so good that it was published and was spread all around Alameda County.

[00:31:19] **CINDY:** Was that used on the college level or in high schools?

[00:31:23] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Elementary and high school.

[00:31:34] **CINDY:** Do you want to talk at all about any of your marriages that you had? You don't have to.

[00:31:44] **BOBBIE SINGER:** No.

[00:31:45] **CINDY:** Okay. What brought you up to Seattle and to the Labor Chorus?

[00:31:54] **BOBBIE SINGER:** I lived in Berkeley for 50 years, and when my husband died, my son brought me up to Seattle.

[00:32:20] **CINDY:** Did you have an interest in music and in participating in that way, or was it just kind of a natural thing?

[00:32:29] **BOBBIE SINGER:** It was kind of a natural thing.

[00:32:30] **CINDY:** A natural thing, just to get in. Is there anything else in your life that stands out for you? Someone who really influenced you that you haven't talked about, or anything else of significance that happened during your career, teaching and public health?

[00:33:06] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Eleanor Roosevelt was a heroine of mine.

[00:33:16] **CINDY:** I know Dan mentioned something about that at one time you saved your sister's life?

[00:33:27] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Oh, my sister was going to commit suicide. She worked at the Ethical Culture Summer Play School, and she had planned to commit suicide when she came home from work. I telephoned the man who was in charge of the Ethical Culture Summer Play School and he had her into his office and talked her out of committing suicide until at least after school. She was a very brilliant student. She graduated from Smith College magna cum laude.

[00:34:31] **CINDY:** So, Bobbie, how are you feeling? Are you feeling like you're finished? Is there anything else you want to talk about, have recorded?

[00:34:48] **BOBBIE SINGER:** No. What I do now is I try to give my money away to the causes that I really believe in.

[00:35:02] **CINDY:** What are some of those?

[00:35:12] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Number one is Planned Parenthood. And some of the environmental causes. Then the Seattle Labor Chorus. [chuckles]

[00:35:30] **CINDY:** Yes, you have. Thank you. Anything more, or are you feeling finished?

[00:35:41] **BOBBIE SINGER:** Finished.

[00:35:43] **CINDY:** Okay. Thank you so much, Bobbie.

[00:35:47] **BOBBIE SINGER:** What are you going to use all this information for?

[00:35:49] **CINDY:** Okay.